

Autism in College Students Fact Sheet

Autism is a genetic, neurological condition that persists throughout one's lifetime. It is often diagnosed by age three, but sometimes much later in students who do not have a delay in acquiring language as children. There may be students on a college campus who have only recently received a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and some who received a diagnosis in childhood. Many different diagnostic labels fall under the ASD umbrella, including Asperger's, Autism, and PDD-NOS.

"Current evidence indicates that the central distinction is that autistic brains are characterized by particularly high levels of synaptic connectivity and responsiveness. This tends to make the autistic individual's subjective experience more intense and chaotic than that of non-autistic individuals: on both the sensorimotor and cognitive levels, the autistic mind tends to register more information, and the impact of each bit of information tends to be both stronger and less predictable."* Most autistic people spend a great deal of energy navigating the sensory and social worlds, which can leave them exhausted for other endeavors.

Autistic students may have:

- Differences in conversational language styles, different interpretations of cultural social cues, including non-verbal cues
- A strong visual memory, which makes it important to put changes to the syllabus, or test dates, as well as other directions, in WRITING
- Sensory and auditory processing differences which make processing the spoken word difficult or impossible in certain environments, particularly those with background noise, or many conversations at once
- A need to use assistive technology for neurological hand-writing difficulties
- A need to use self-calming techniques to deal with too much sensory input – techniques may include repetitive movements, words or phrases; activities such as knitting or pacing; or looking at a cell phone or iPad in order to maintain focus
- A deep knowledge and enthusiasm in areas of interest and in learning in general, which may result in energetic participation in class
- Access support needs for some executive functioning skills

In addition, autistic students can have associated conditions that can include sensory processing differences, gastrointestinal difficulties, sleep disturbances, anxiety disorders, learning disabilities, ADHD, and more.

It's important to keep in mind that these differences have a neurological, and not a behavioral or psychological basis. A typical autistic college student is in class because they want to be there, and they are working very hard to pay attention, complete their work, and understand and execute what is expected of them. If you experience difficulty with a student, the best course of action is to be direct and kind, and always assume that the student has the best intentions. The Autism Spectrum Navigators program can offer assistance with communication or other difficulties that may arise.

Sources: Organization for Autism Research: <http://www.researchautism.org/>

*Neurocosmopolitan: <http://neurocosmopolitanism.com/what-is-autism/>

Center for Disease Control/ASDs homepage: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/>

